

1-1-2009

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Recommended Citation

Hawkins, Jay (2009) "Micah 2.12-13: I Will Surely Gather You," *Leaven*: Vol. 17: Iss. 1, Article 6.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol17/iss1/6>

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Micah 2.12-13: I Will Surely Gather You

JAY HAWKINS

*I will surely gather all of you, O Jacob,
I will gather the survivors of Israel;
I will set them together
like sheep in a fold,
like a flock in its pasture;
The one who breaks out will go up before them;
they will break through and pass the gate,
going out by it.
Their king will pass on before them,
the LORD at their head.
~ Micah 2.12-13*

The city of Jerusalem rises over the land. It is night. The land is quiet. Under the light of the stars the walls of the city stand tall, offering protection, proclaiming that Jerusalem is a fortress, built for strength.

Inside the walls we see something else, though. There we find a few people gathered at the gates, even now in the deepest hours of nighttime: soldiers, citizens, royal officials. They carry on conversations in whispers and low tones. A few individuals pass from one group to another, seeking out words that are different from what they've heard already. And always the question continually asked: "What is happening?"

Does anyone really know? The enemy has invaded the land, reports say. Towns and cities are falling. Rumors of gruesome atrocities get passed around, but the support for these rumors is vague. Are the stories true? Will messengers from elsewhere arrive in the morning to tell us something certain?

Are we cut off? Can Jerusalem stand? What is happening out there?

ANOTHER PLACE, ANOTHER TIME

Go to another place now and hear different conversations. Go in the front door of a church building somewhere out there across the plains and mountains of America. Take a moment before services begin and listen to the conversations.

A couple in late middle age, kids gone from home, enjoying a little more freedom, tell others about their recent cross-country trip. These people are open-minded. They've rolled with the changes in this church. But they're puzzled by what they saw on their trip: "You visited a church, and you never knew what you would get in a worship service. Just walking in the door of a church building is a throw of the dice."

A woman walking the aisles with a clipboard and pen stops and talks to one particular person: "Can I sign you up for our new prayer partners' ministry? I'm so glad they're doing this. It's what we've needed for a long time. It gets people to know each other, pray for each other. I've been wanting this so badly. Can I sign you up?"

One member is discussing a recent book he's read, hot off the religious presses. He tells his friend, "I've been saying forever that we're doing this whole church thing wrong here. You've got to read this book. It says that we need to be doing church different starting from the ground up, not just tinkering around."

Hear a man slumped on the pew beside his wife. "I'm out of my mind," he says, "working sixty-hour weeks right now and I just volunteered to serve on the new outreach group." His wife sighs.

Hear the mom, fighting back tears telling a friend about the latest revelation with her son. He started college a few months ago and finally admitted that he's not going to church anymore; he doesn't see the point.

At that church there's a larger question, unspoken, a question that asks: what is happening? Something has infiltrated our land and there are conversations going on about it. Something is going on. We try to get reports—data about the goings-on in our culture, charts and graphs showing what is happening to our churches.

Take a moment and observe a variety of things going on.

In recent years it's been noted that religion and spirituality are proliferating.¹ We find encouragement in that trend, yet we're dismayed that this burst of spiritual fervor has produced a bizarre smorgasbord of religion, with something for everyone, fitting every peculiar taste.

SERIOUS CONVERSATIONS

There are serious conversations about trends we're seeing. People say young people are flowing out of churches like water through a sieve. *The Christian Chronicle* recently ran a series called "Are We Growing?" about Churches of Christ in America.² Looking at the numbers, it doesn't sound like it.

Over the last number of years, the question has been asked about identity in our churches. What makes a Church of Christ a Church of Christ anymore? Are baptism and the Lord's Supper enough? Or does a question like that even matter? Is it even the right question to ask? We ask the questions and discuss the answers because as a fellowship of churches, we're just not sure anymore.

Something has happened and is still happening. Something's happening in the culture. Something's happening in churches.

Look around in churches. Churches have changed. See the blended families. There are more of them than there used to be. It reminds us of divorces that have happened, homes broken.

I heard a school counselor say recently that she's observed something in the families that talk to her: people are tired. Why is that? What have we done to make that so?

Have you noticed that in a lot of towns and neighborhoods there's just not the same community feel there used to be, not the same public spirit?³ Then realize that a lot of churches would say the same thing about themselves. There's not the same kind of strong bond in churches there used to be.⁴

MICAH SPEAKS TO US TODAY

Are these all different, unrelated things or is there something larger behind all this? What do we say? But the big question is, what has all this done to us?

Micah speaks to us today, not to give words that would answer those questions but to give us God's words. God says to us: I will surely gather you. I will gather survivors.

And we see in the Jerusalem that once was, the truth of those words. Its mighty gates swing open to welcome people. This is the work of God. Jerusalem, God's beloved city, receives those fleeing in from the

1. Diana L. Eck, *A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001).

2. This series of articles began with a feature story in *The Christian Chronicle*, February 2007, and concluded in the January 2008 issue.

3. Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 48–64.

4. *Ibid.*, 70–72.

countryside, from villages and towns. They come carrying all that they now own, refugees from an invading enemy. God is gathering them together. He gathers them not as a sovereign nation, able to defend itself. He gathers them as weak and desperate, hoping only that God can save them together.

And today Micah tells us that there is a gathering for us. We will not be gathered as mighty, confident warriors splendidly armed for battle, but as refugees—besieged, vulnerable and weak. If there was a time when we were confident that we had everything worked out—right system of church government, just like the New Testament said, the right stances on . . . you name it, what's really supposed to happen (and not supposed to happen) in worship. If there was a time when we were so confident, something has happened that shakes our confidence.

As things have happened to us over the last while, we've had a great number of remedies pushed toward churches: "This is what will turn it around." And yet each year that passes has caused those remedies to seem paltry.

It's time for God to gather us to each other, to build relationships anew. We're vulnerable and we don't have the easy solutions like we thought we did, but this is a good thing. Confidence is failing but somehow, in a strange way, this is what we have needed. We have needed to need God together.

Micah promises us: God will gather you.

Yet the questions we'd ask then are: When we're gathered, will we find security? When we're gathered in the fold, will the walls of the fold protect us?

The people of Judah and Israel would know about this. They questioned God on this one, laid responsibility at his feet. They have psalms that would cry out for them in their sadness. Psalm 60 starts by blistering forth: "O God, you have rejected us, broken our defenses." You haven't protected us like you were supposed to!

So the questions for us are: Will we be protected? Will God give us safety? If churches are in such turmoil, if (according to what experts are saying) stresses on church leaders have increased immensely over the last while, if the forces of the culture around have spilled into the church, can God give us protection now from those things?⁵ Can churches truly be a place of safety and stability in a tumultuous world? If Micah promises us that God will gather us into the sheepfold, can the walls of the fold stand?

Micah speaks to us again. He says the one who breaks, God the Breaker, Lord Almighty, will break the walls of security. Jerusalem, the great city of hope, will be broken and God will do it. He has gathered his people behind the walls of the sheepfold and now he will break the walls of the fold, he will break the gate. The walls in which we trust, the safety for which we have hoped, the security we have been seeking will be smashed, torn down, obliterated.

THIS IS THE TIME OF THE BREAKING

This is the time of the breaking.

All the things that promised safety will be taken from us. Getting worship right? God breaks it to pieces. The hope we put in it crumbles. Getting a leadership system in churches where elders and ministers and deacons and ministry leaders are finally doing the right things? God smashes it to smithereens. Don't put your final hope in it. Finding the right way to get non-Christians interested and excited about what we have to offer? It's blown apart, lying strewn on the ground. The next program or idea we float to keep our kids safe from the encroaching world? The plan to improve retention or get people involved in ministry? None of these will do what we have so often demanded they do for us. Everything will fall short. They will all be broken.

God is the one who breaks. We know the Breaker. We could call on biblical witnesses and they would testify for us. Paul from his letter to the Ephesians would say that God broke down the wall between Jews and Gentiles. Mary Magdalene would tell us that God's Son broke out of the tomb on Sunday morning. Today we could ask among us, "Are there people who would rise up and witness for us that God is the One

5. Alan J. Roxburgh, *The Sky is Falling: Leaders Lost in Transition* (Eagle, Idaho: Allelon, 2006).

who Breaks?" And here someone might rise up and say that when they had accomplished such fantastic things to build the most sparkling resume, God broke their pride, and in doing so they now rise up to say that he is a holy God. One could rise up there and testify that when it seemed they were holding life together by one thin thread, God broke that last thread and they would stand today to tell us that when they thought they had nothing, God became everything to them. We can testify that God is the One who Breaks.

So we may want safety and security, but God is breaking our walls. In a time of stress, in a time of figuring out what's going on, God is destroying what we have so often put up as our security.

When Jerusalem lies in ruins, God will say, "Let me show you things you may not have seen, a whole world beyond, a world to which I am going." When his people weep over Jerusalem, God will point them to far off nations and cities and empires and say, "That is where I am going, that is where I am leading. Jerusalem will not be my only dwelling place. I will be out there in the world beyond."

Today he would take us beyond the wreckage and ruins of our walls. He will take us past the broken gate that once stood so strong. He will take us to fields beyond and show us more than we have seen.

He will take us into homes where violence has ruled for generations and we will see the lives and the hurts and the dreams that inhabit those homes. He will take us into coffee shops and bars where atheists sit at tables with Muslims, where people are seeking to know each other and to love and be loved. He will take us into neighborhoods that until this time we have spent a lot of money and effort avoiding for our security and the security of our children. He will lead us there and we will see people holding families together and doing good to each other and trying the best they can—but like us, so in need of God. He will show us our workplaces anew. We'll see schools with fresh vision.

God will not just take us there to have a look and pass on. He will show us himself, dwelling there in the midst of the world; when we arrive, he is already there. And then he will show us our own lives lived there—his people, for the sake of the world, the church dwelling in the midst of the world. Questions about whether or not we can get worship in our church buildings right may very well get cast aside because as we stand in the midst of the world and neighborhoods and public schools and workplaces, the question on our hearts will be, "How can we worship in spirit and in truth here in the midst of the world?"

THE CHURCH WILL FIND A NEW IDENTITY—A PEOPLE GATHERED, A PEOPLE GOING

The church will find a new identity—as a people *gathered*, yes, but for the purpose that we might be a people *going*. And always the two together—gathered, but then going.

A day is coming and is right upon us when we will say that God has taken us forth, not by our plans, because if it had been up to us, we would have stayed with the safety and security that the walls offered us. But the walls have been broken, and we are being led by God.

A college student said to me recently that he was involved with a small church whose glory days were gone. The days of packed houses were long over. The church had had to face that hard reality. But he said, "When we look around where our building is, there are so many single moms in the neighborhood. And we can do something to help them." His church is threatened. But for him it's a time of hope. There's a world beyond the walls, and the church has a place there. It's a time of being gathered in a new way and a time to go.

Something has happened. The land has been invaded. We are under threat. But God will gather and we will go. And as we go, we will praise our God who led us forward, the king who passed on before us, the LORD at our head.

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